

REFLECTION ESSAYS



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Hearing Is Believing: Using Audio Feedback in the Online Interpersonal Communication Course

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Abstract: The introduction to interpersonal communication course (IPC) is popular for both communication majors and nonmajors alike, and as such, many departments have designed online versions of the course. Teaching IPC in this format has challenges, given its dual emphasis on theoretical understanding and skill-building. This reflection essay explores the efficacy of providing audio feedback on essays in the online IPC course, as a way to create a positive online presence, manage the grading load, and encourage students to implement the feedback. The rationale for this approach to feedback and implementation strategies are provided, as well as a discussion of outcomes from the intervention. A review of course data and perceptions indicated gains in student application of course material and satisfaction with the audio feedback mechanism.

Although public speaking is often the required general education communication course, the undergraduate introduction to interpersonal communication course (IPC) still is taught frequently at colleges and universities across the U.S. (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). In a survey of communication departments, Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) found that 96% of them offered an IPC course, an increase of 25% since 1999. Though online instruction has increased dramatically over the past few years, online sections of IPC courses may have grown more slowly than other communication courses (Alexander & Natalie, 2015; Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). This could be due, in part, to the course's goals of both theoretical instruction and skill development (DeVito, 1991).

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Broadly speaking, faculty are still skeptical that online instruction can be as effective as face-to-face instruction. A recent survey of college faculty indicated that only 35% of faculty who teach online agree that online instruction can be as effective as in-person instruction in the courses they teach (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Over a decade ago, in 2006, I received a grant from my university teaching center to transform our IPC course from an in-person course into an online format. At the time, there was little literature available about teaching IPC online. Like the faculty in Jaschik and Lederman's survey, I was not opposed to online courses, but I was skeptical that the online environment would be suitable for an IPC course.

In this reflection essay, I describe my experience of re-designing and refining a traditional, face-to-face IPC course for the online environment. More specifically, I discuss the challenges of grading load, student application of feedback, and instructor immediacy, and how providing audio feedback on students' written work helped to mitigate these challenges.

Description of the Course

Our institution offers approximately four sections of IPC each semester. The course attracts about 60% communication majors (because it is a pre-requisite) and 40% non-majors (because it fulfills a general education requirement). Like most other programs, the course is taught as an introduction to both interpersonal communication theories and skills (Alexander & Natalie, 2015; DeVito, 1991; Webb & Thompson-Hayes, 2002), and addresses communication process models, identity theory, the perception and attribution process, verbal and nonverbal communication, and conflict and relational communication theories, among other topics.

Each face-to-face IPC section traditionally enrolled 30 students; however, with the online sections, the university administration encouraged us to increase the course enrollment cap to 35. More recently, we were encouraged to admit students on the waiting list, increasing the average number of students in an online section to between 35 and 40. Although it is not a pedagogical best practice, many institutions report increasing caps in online sections of courses as a way to increase enrollment (Taft, Perkowski, & Martin, 2011).

As I developed my online course, I worked with an instructional designer to create three short paper assignments to replace or simulate some of the skill-building activities I normally facilitated in the face-to-face class. In each paper assignment, I asked the students to participate in a skill-building activity, synthesize and cite the communication theory they had learned thus far in the course, and reflect on their experiences in the skill-building activity. For the first paper assignment, students experienced a culture other than their own as a visitor and reflected on this difference using vocabulary from identity theory and intercultural communication. For the second paper assignment, students observed nonverbal rules in three settings, and in one setting I asked them to violate a simple social rule (e.g., talking too loudly or softly in a check-out line). The third paper included two components. First, the students read a short dialogue of a negative interaction between two romantic partners. Applying the principles discussed in the course, I asked the students to re-write the couple's dialogue into a more positive conversation. Second, I asked students to write a short narrative explaining the changes they made to the dialogue citing the course vocabulary and principles. As I implemented exclusively the papers and other aspects of the online version of the course, I emerged a few challenges.

Teaching Challenges

I encountered three challenges in teaching this new online IPC course. The first challenge I faced was related to the size of the online course sections. Although I had only five to 10 more students per section, that was as many as 60 more papers to grade. I quickly got behind on grading, even though I knew that timing is one of the most important aspects of feedback (Bonnell, Ludwig, & Smith, 2008). When I did finish a class set of papers in a reasonable time frame, I was unable to give my students the depth of written feedback necessary to improve their skills and encourage application of the theoretical content (Alexander & Natalie, 2015; Cavanaugh & Song, 2014).

Secondly, my students were not applying the feedback I offered on their paper assignments. This issue was particularly evident on students' submissions of the second paper. For example, in addition to their numerical score obtained using the rubric for the first paper assignment, I offered written comments such as, "You did an excellent job connecting your personal communication experiences to the material in your paper. For future papers, try developing a narrative, rather than simply answering the questions in a list. Writing in paragraph form might help you to draw connections between the questions in a way you might not have thought about." The student then would submit the second paper assignment that still contained a list of answers to the paper prompts, rather than a coherent essay with an introduction, body, and conclusion. Although this issue was not unique to teaching IPC online, I believe the asynchronous nature of the course exacerbated the problem, as I did not see my students as frequently (if at all).

The lack of opportunity for less formal, more timely interaction with students was a third challenge. I struggled to establish the robust connections with my online students that I did in my face-to-face courses. Even though I responded regularly in the online forums, it was challenging to get to know each student. I had trouble remembering their names and, at times, I found myself missing the sense of community that I had always developed in my face-to-face courses. I was not alone; creating instructor immediacy is a challenge for many online instructors (Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, & Lauer, 2017). More troubling than my feelings of lack of community, I was worried that my students were not developing the comfort required to openly question concepts and share their experiences as they would in my face-to-face class. Though they cited the textbook concepts in the discussion forum assignments, I often had to prompt them to relate those concepts to their experiences, which had never been a problem in my face-to-face sections. With these three challenges in mind, I turned to the literature for solutions.

Audio Feedback in Online Courses

Typically, in both face-to-face and online courses, feedback on papers is given in written form. However, with the advent of online learning, more instructors are considering new technology-enhanced ways to give feedback to students (Cavanaugh & Song, 2014; Dixson et al., 2017). A few studies (Cavanaugh & Song; Dixson et al.; Oomen-Early, Bold, Wiginton, Gallien, & Anderson, 2008; Wood, Moskovitz, & Valiga, 2011) indicate that students find online comments helpful. One study in the nursing discipline found that 70% of the students surveyed understood their instructor's comments more effectively with audio comments, 67% of the students felt more involved with the course, and 80% found the audio comments to be more personal (Wood et al.). In a controlled experiment with undergraduate students, Butler, Godbole, and Marsh (2013) examined the transfer of learning that occurred with three types of feedback: (1) correct answer, (2) no feedback, and (3) explanatory feedback (i.e., providing an explanation of why a particular response is correct or incorrect). They found that both correct answer feedback and

explanatory feedback encouraged students to recall concepts; however, explanatory feedback also enabled learners to facilitate deeper comprehension by being able to apply the knowledge to new contexts.

This literature review led me to consider how audio feedback comments could benefit more than just my students' abilities to apply course material across papers or manage my grading load. Rather, a multimedia approach such as this could be appropriate in helping me to make my thinking process visible to the students and demonstrate immediacy, two things about which I was worried when putting the course online.

Intervention and Study

In the following semester, I decided to provide audio feedback comments for student papers in my online IPC course as a strategy to create social presence, help students implement corrective feedback, and manage my grading workload. To introduce this technique to students, I created a short video explaining the process. Although I still completed the quantitative rubric for each student's paper, each student also received an individualized audio file of my voice explaining the quantitative score in lieu of providing written comments.

Admittedly, it took me a few attempts to become proficient in the new grading and recording process. I read each paper electronically and assigned it a number score on the rubric. I recorded a 60–90-second audio feedback file using Voice Recorder, the native audio recording program that is automatically installed with the Windows operating system (for Mac users, QuickTime has a built-in audio recorder). I made each recording while the student's paper was visible on my computer screen so that I could refer to specific areas of excellence or improvement. I began each audio recording with the student's name and tried to keep a relatively informal tone, as if I were having a conversation with the student in my office. I chose not to edit the audio file to limit the amount of time each one would take to complete, which decreased my grading time substantially. Once grading was completed, I uploaded the rubric and audio file (in mp3 format) to the learning management system (LMS) in the same section where students would find their paper score.

Since I first put my IPC course online in 2006, technology has changed dramatically. For example, the early Windows-based voice recording software was clunky, and the files would take a long time to upload into the LMS and could not be compressed. Sometimes, students had trouble opening the files, so I had to transcribe my comments anyway. Recently, our institution switched to the Canvas LMS, which includes a voice recording function within the gradebook. This has made the audio feedback process on papers even less time-consuming. Additionally, many faculty are using new software (i.e., VoiceThread) to encourage more engaging video, audio, and pictorial asynchronous communication (Dixson et al., 2017).

Student Responses and Assessment

To evaluate the effectiveness of this change in my assessment strategy in this course, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The first challenge—the amount of time I spent grading papers for my increased course size—was strongly mitigated by this new approach. As Ribchester, France, and Wheeler (2007) explained, many instructors choose to use audio feedback mechanisms because they can speak more quickly than they can either write or type. This was definitely

true for me. When providing written feedback, I could barely finish grading a class set of papers in 3 hours. With audio recordings, I was able to complete a class set in under 2 hours. Once I implemented the audio feedback model, I was able to return two sections of papers within a week without a struggle.

The second challenge—my students' lack of attention to my feedback on their papers—also was improved by the audio feedback approach. Quantitatively, about 40% of my students increased their scores at least 5% between the first and third papers. Particularly, their scores increased in three criteria of the Paper 3 rubric:

- ▶ Vocabulary: Does the paper utilize the vocabulary of power, conflict, and relationships correctly and appropriately? Are all borrowed definitions cited?
- ▶ Clarity: Does the scenario include responses that clearly illustrate the goals of each character? Does the justification clearly explain the reasons for each change?
- ▶ Research: Does the paper use at least one academic (peer-reviewed) source? Is it appropriately integrated into the text of the paper? Is it cited appropriately in-text and on a works cited/references page?

Qualitatively, I saw the students incorporating my feedback into their papers as well. They specifically attended to my comments in their subsequent papers, thus better meeting the course goals. This outcome was consistent with the work of Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007), who found that audio feedback increased students' perceptions of their ability to remember and apply course content.

The third challenge—creating instructor immediacy and a positive student-teacher relationship—was addressed in my students' responsiveness to me and my student ratings of instruction. For example, after sending the audio feedback on the first paper assignment, I asked students to e-mail me a few comments about what they liked and did not like about the new feedback approach. Of my 40 students in the course, 14 were positive, 15 did not respond to my survey, and 11 had some constructive feedback. They asked for more specific comments and suggestions for improvement; I also received a number of requests to speak more slowly. I was immediately able to implement my students' suggestions. I began using the structure of "liked best, next time" for organizing my audio feedback (these are the things I liked best, these are the areas they could improve next time). For example, I would often make a comment such as, "I like what you did in this section because it effectively synthesizes your experience with the course material. In this other area, consider applying this concept. It might more effectively articulate your argument." By structuring feedback in this manner, I was able to demonstrate to students my commitment to helping them grow. For example, one of my students e-mailed me and said, "I am really enjoying the videos and audio recordings regarding critiques with my grades instead of just getting little notes in the comments section. It helps make it feel more like I am in an actual classroom."

My student ratings of instruction (SRIs) also reflected a positive change in my relationship with students after implementing the audio feedback. For example, my mean score for "my instructor provided helpful feedback on my work" was 4.83/5, which was higher than both the department mean (4.19) and college mean (4.31). The audio feedback comments were the most frequently commented upon part of my course in my SRIs. In fact, two students listed the audio comments as the "most valuable" aspects of the course.

Overall, the process of moving IPC into the online environment was a positive experience, both for me as an instructor and for my students' learning outcomes. Comparing the face-to-face with online sections,

students' final grade distribution has been consistent, and my online section SRIs have remained positive in comparison with face-to-face sections, with approximately 80% of students willing to recommend the course to others.

Conclusion

I implemented an audio feedback strategy in my online IPC class to help create a positive online presence, manage the grading load, and encourage students to implement the feedback. The trend to offer online courses has presented unique challenges to faculty who teach IPC, because the course often includes a mix of theoretical instruction, experiential activities, and reflective writing. Given the number of institutions developing online courses and programs in communication, it is important to ensure the online learning experience is as rich as a face-to-face course. As illustrated by the data collected in my course and my experience with audio feedback, this strategy has the potential to preserve aspects of the face-to-face learning experience in the online IPC course.

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